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THE BARRIER BY REX BEACH

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(Continued)

"I'm going to tell you a story, not because it applies to Lieutenant Burrell."

"Of course," said the girl. "But just to show you what I mean. It was a good long spell ago, when I was at Fort Supply, which was the frontier in them days, like this is now. We freighted in from Dodge City with bull teams, and it was sure the fringe of the frontier—no women, no society, nothing much except a lot of fads and a few officials with their wives and families. Now, them kind of places is all right for married men, but they're tough sledding for single ones, and after awhile a fellow gets awful careless about himself. He seems to go backward and run down civilization and his people and restaurants and such things. He gets plumb reckless and forgetful of what's what. There was a captain with us, a young fellow that looked like the lieutenant here and a good deal the same sort—high tempered and chivalrous and all that sort of thing, a West Pointer, too, and a family and all that, and what's more, a captain at twenty-five. Now, our head freighter was married to a squaw, or leastways he had been, but in them days nobody thought much of it any more than they do up here now, and particularly because he'd had a government contract for a long while, ran a big gang of men and critters and had made a lot of money. Likewise he had a girl, who lived at the fort and was mighty nice to look at and restful to the eye after a year or so of cactus trees and mesquite and buffalo grass. She was twice as nice and twice as pretty as the women at the post, and as for money—well, her dad could have bought and sold all the officers in a lump, but they and their wives looked down on her, and she didn't mix with them none whatever. To make it short, the captain married her. Seemed like he got disinterested of everything, and the hunger to have a woman just overpowered him. She'd been courted by every single man for 400 miles around. She was pretty and full of fire, and they was both of an age to love hard, so Jefferson swore he'd make the other women take her, but soldierin' is a heap different from any other profession, and the army has got its own traditions. The plan wouldn't work."

"By and by the captain got tired of tryin' and gave up the attempt—just devoted himself to her—and then we was transferred, all but him. We shifted to a better post, but Captain Jefferson was changed to another company and had to stay at Supply. Gee, it was a rotten hole! Influence had been used, and there he stuck, while the new officers cut him out completely, just like the others had done, so I was told, and it drifted on that way for a long time, him forever makin' an uphill fight to get his wife recognized and always quittin' loser. His folks back east was scandalized and froze him cold, callin' him a squaw man, and the story went all through the army, till his brother officers had to treat him cold in order to keep enough warmth at home to live by, one thing leadin' to another till he finally resented it openly. After that he didn't last long. They made it so unpleasant that he quit the service—crowded him out, that's all. He was a born soldier, too, and didn't know nothin' else nor care for nothin' else; as fine a man as I ever served under, but it soured him so that a rattlesnake couldn't have lived with him. He tried to go into some kind of business after he quit the army, but he wasn't cut out for it and never made good as long as I knew of him. The last time I seen him was down on the border, and he had sure grov'n civil. He had quit the squaw, who was livin' with a greaser in Tucson."

"And do you think I'm like that woman?" said Neela in a queer, strained voice. She had listened intently to the corporal's story, but he had purposely avoided her eyes and could not tell how she was taking it. "No; You're different, but the army is just the same. I told you this to show you how it is out in the States. It don't apply to you, of course!" "Of course!" agreed Neela again. "But what would happen to Lieutenant Burrell if—if—well, if he should do something like that? There are many half breed girls, I dare say, like this other girl, or—like me."

She did not flush now as before. Instead her cheeks were pale. "It would go a heap worse with him than it did with Captain Jefferson," said the corporal. "For he's got more ahead of him, and he comes from better stock. Why, his family is way up." "I never thought of myself as an Indian," said Neela dully. "In this country it's a person's heart that counts."

"That's how it ought to be," said the corporal heartily. "And I'm mighty sorry if I've hurt you, little girl. I'm a rough old boister, and I never thought but what you understood all this. Up here folks look at it right, but outside the mighty different. Even you got you don't half understand."

"I'm glad I'm what I am," cried the girl. "There's nothing in my blood to

be ashamed of, and I'm white in here." She struck her bosom fiercely. "If a man loves me he'll take me, no matter what it means to him."

The corporal slid down from the counter where he had been sitting. "I'm going to hunt up the lieutenant and get him to let me off. Maybe I can stake a claim and sell it."

The moment he was gone the girl's composure vanished, and she gave vent to her feelings.

"It's a lie! It's a lie!" she cried aloud, and with her fists she beat the boards in front of her. "He loves me! I know he does!" Then she began to tremble and sobbed. "I'm just like other girls."

She was still wrestling with herself when Gale returned, and he started at the look in her face as she approached him.

"Why did you marry my mother?" she asked. "Why? Why did you do it?"

He saw that she was in a rage and answered bluntly. "I didn't."

She shrank at this. "Then why didn't you? Shame! Shame! That makes me worse than I thought I was. Oh, why did you ever turn squaw man? Why did you make me a breed?"

"Look here! What are you?" said the trader.

"I've just begun to realize what I am. I'm not respectable. I'm not like other women and never can be. I'm a squaw—a squaw!"

"You're not!" he cried.

"No honest man can marry me. I'm a vagabond! The best I can get is my bed and board, like my mother."

"By heaven! Who offered you that?" Gale's face was whiter than hers now, but she disregarded him.

"He can play with me, but nothing more, and when he is gone another one can have me, and then another and another and another."

"That's all infernal rot," he said. "There's fifty good men in this camp would marry you tomorrow."

"Hah! I mean real men, not miners. I want to be a lady. I don't want to pull a hand sled and wear moccasins all my life and raise children for men with whiskers. I want to be loved—I want to be loved! I want to marry a gentleman."

"Burrell!" said Gale.

"No," she flared up—"not him nor anybody in particular, but somebody like him, some man with clean finger nails."

He found nothing humorous or grotesque in her measure of a gentleman, for he realized that she was stung to a pitch of unreason and unnatural excitement and that she was in terrible earnest.

The old man hesitated. "I'll own I was wrong," he said finally, starting out into the sunshine with an odd expression. "It was thoughtless and wrong, dead wrong, but I've loved you better than any daughter was ever loved in this wide world, and I've worked and starved and froze and saved, and so has Aluna, so that you might have something to live on when I'm gone and be different from us. It won't be long now, I guess. I've given you the best schooling of any girl on the river, and I'd have sent you out to a convent in the States, but I couldn't let you go so far away. I loved you too much for that! I couldn't do it, girl. I've tried, but you're all I've got, and I'm a selfish man, I reckon."

"No, no! You're not!" his daughter cried impulsively. "You're everything that's good and dear, but you've lived a different life from other men, and you see things differently. It was mean of me to talk as I did." She put her arms around his neck and hugged him. "But I'm very unhappy, dad."

"Don't you aim to tell what started this?" he said gently, caressing her with his great, hard hand as softly as a mother. But she shook her head, and he continued, "I'll take the first boat down to the mission and marry you if you want me to."

"That wouldn't do any good," said she. "We'd better leave things as they are." Then she drew away and smiled at him bravely from the door. "I'm very bad to act this way. Guess."

He nodded, and she went out. Neela was in a restless mood, and remembering that Aluna and the children had gone berrying on the slopes behind the Indian village, she turned her way thither. All at once a fear of seeing Mende Burrell came upon her. She wanted to think this out, to find where she stood, before he had word with her. She had been led to observe herself from a strange angle and must verify her vision, as it were. What if he had changed now that he was alone and had had time to think? It would kill her if she saw any difference in him, and she knew she would be able to read it in his eyes.

As she went through the main street of the camp she saw Stark occupied near the water front, where he had bought a building lot. He spoke to her as she was about to pass.

"Good morning, miss. Are you restful about your trip?"

She answered that she was and would have continued on her way, but he stopped her.

(To Be Continued)

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